



REVIEW: EDITION

Lettere e Documenti / Pisma in Dokumenti / Letters and Documents, two volumes

Giuseppe Tartini (1692–1770), ed. Giorgia Malagò
Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2020
Volume 1, pp. 374, ISBN 978 8 855 11066 2
Volume 2, pp. 531, ISBN 978 8 855 11068 6

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The publication of the letters of Giuseppe Tartini (1692–1770) represents an invaluable collection of primary sources for the study of eighteenth-century music. Tartini, nicknamed ‘Il Maestro delle Nazioni’, had an international reputation as a violinist, composer, pedagogue and music theorist, and cultivated a robust network of relationships. This edition presents his letters in their original language (volume 1), accompanied by translations in Slovenian and English (volume 2).

The project of publishing the extant correspondence of Tartini occupied most of the life of Tartini scholar Pierluigi Petrobelli (1932–2012), who managed to collect about two hundred letters. This was an impressive achievement, considering the dispersal of the sources in libraries, archives and private collections throughout Europe and the United States. Towards the end of his life, Petrobelli made the letters available to his colleague Sergio Durante, who, at the University of Padua, had created what remains today a vibrant centre for Tartini studies.

This is where Giorgia Malagò admirably completed the task of collecting and transcribing the majority of extant letters. In her introduction she clarifies the editorial criteria and provides an overview of the status of the epistolary sources. The first volume includes the text of the letters in the original language, numbered from 1 to 183 and reproduced in chronological order. The first letter is from Prague, written by Tartini in 1723 to his brother, in which he makes a strange remark about his own wife, Elisabetta Premazore: ‘good or bad she may be, I have to take [her] as she is’ (letter 1, volume 2, page 250 (Italian in volume 1, page 110); from here I refer to all quotations with the letter number and the page(s) of the published translation in volume 2). The majority of the letters were written from Padua, where Tartini lived for most of his life. His final missives were sent to his brother’s son. On 5 February 1770 he describes his terrible suffering owing to his leg being ‘enormously swollen, and an ulcer in a toe of the same leg, which causes me constant pain’, confessing, ‘I am all too tired of living’ (letter 182, 468–469). Ten days later, in his last surviving letter, also directed to his nephew, he writes, ‘[I am] urging you to be here immediately’ (letter 183, 469). The epistolary drama ends here, leaving the reader in suspense, imagining the elderly musician waiting to die any moment, yet hoping to see his beloved nephew for the last time.

Alongside the Slovenian and English translations of Tartini’s letters, the second volume includes twenty-six high-quality photographic reproductions of iconographic material related to Tartini and his work. The appendices present several documents, including legal memoranda regarding a Venetian innkeeper who accused Tartini of fathering her child during a casual sexual encounter in 1722. Tartini denied the accusation, as stated in the legal document (no. 187, 478). Like Michael Jackson in ‘Billie Jean’, we can imagine him singing ‘she’s just a girl who claims that I am the one,

but the kid is not my son'. The fact that Tartini moved to Prague at this time – as we gather from the first three letters, staying there long enough to escape the wrath of the pregnant innkeeper and of his wife, whom he had to keep, 'good or bad she may be' – should make the reader reflect on how understanding the life of a man through his letters and documents requires us to connect the dots.

Almost all of the letters in this edition are by Tartini, and only about a dozen are by correspondents writing to Tartini. As the editor makes clear in the Introduction, the correspondence is in fact fragmentary, as most of the letters Tartini received are missing. One exception is the intact exchange of letters concerning music theory between Tartini and the mathematician Giordano Riccati (1709–1790), published in a volume edited by Luca Del Fra (*Commercio di lettere intorno ai principj dell'armonia fra il Signor Giuseppe Tartini; ed il Co[n]te Giordano Riccati* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2007)). This group of letters has not been included in the present edition, which some readers may find unfortunate, because the Del Fra edition does not include an English translation.

Notwithstanding the omission of Tartini's correspondence with Riccati, readers interested in music theory will still find a plethora of information within the edition. Many letters complement Tartini's theoretical works by addressing doubts and questions that may be raised by readers of his treatises. His approach to the study of harmony presents a conflation of ancient and modern music theory. The more traditional method was still based on the practice of measuring intervals as ratios of a line corresponding to the monochord string, as evidenced by Tartini's letter to Padre Martini in 1731 (letter 5, 256–264). In a 1766 missive to his student Johann Gottlieb Naumann, Tartini recommended that before travelling he 'should copy the plan of the monochord on a strip of paper (with measurements used by tailors)' (letter 164, 448). The modern approach is based on physics of sound and observations conducted using different instruments (as illustrated in letter 7, 266–267). Sounds are conceived as the product of vibrations of sounding bodies rather than lengths of a line, as when Tartini describes experiments conducted with his colleague Francesco Antonio Vallotti to advance their knowledge of the phenomenon of the third tone, known also as the 'Tartini tone' (letter 98, 364–365). This approach also informs the exchange with the Swiss mathematician Leonhard Euler (letter 120, 400–404, and letter 121, 404–409), leading to the understanding of the third tone as resulting from the difference between two frequencies. Notwithstanding the use of scientific observations and experiments typical of the Age of Reason, Tartini never doubts the authority of Plato in matters of music theory. For him, the study of music is a form of science unlocking cosmic secrets described in the *Timaeus*, which leads him to a conflation of metaphysics and physics, as is apparent in a letter to the polymath Francesco Algarotti (letter 71, 324–328). Tartini discusses issues related to theory with both scholars and practical musicians, but in a letter to his former violin student Michele Stratico he vents, 'I believe more and more firmly that the concept of harmony formed by learned men is quite different from that of us professionals' (letter 129, 415). This apparent tension with the academic world is also caused by Tartini's belief that music is superior to other disciplines, as is evident when he writes to Martini in 1769: 'Music, or better said, the science of harmonics, is not otherwise subordinate to arithmetic and geometry; it is actually that prime principle which allows no other principle before it' (letter 176, 461).

The letters concern other topics beyond music theory. Tartini's views on performance can be best appreciated in his famous letter to the violinist Maddalena Lombardini Sirmen (letter 140, 426–428), but other letters are equally illuminating about his work as a teacher. In 1731 Tartini wrote to Martini informing him that he had nine students that year, too many to allow him to give them the attention they deserved (letter 13, 271–272, and letter 18, 274–275). Considering that his main occupation was solo violinist and concertmaster in the Basilica di Sant'Antonio di Padova, nine students were indeed more than he could handle, but only because of his serious commitment to his pupils during and after their training. Time and again, Tartini expresses concern for his students' progress and well-being, recommends them for jobs and worries when he perceives that a student is stressed owing to personal matters or financial hardship. He details the cost of living in Padua for music students (letter 24, 278–279, and letter 31, 286–287) and asks the sponsor of his pupil Bernard Sheff to send the student more

money after noticing that the young man was agitated and could not focus during lessons (letter 26, 280–281). In a letter to Prince Giuseppe Ximenes d’Aragona, Tartini provides more precise information about the cost of living for a student, including expenditure on food, laundry, shoes, the barber and violin strings (letter 104, 378–380). This is one of the many examples of how these documents can open a window to the history of microeconomics as an important component of a social history of music. Other letters concern financial matters affecting musicians, including taxes they are expected to pay and could not afford and the complex economy of music printing and circulation of printed music before modern copyright laws.

These letters also provide a unique window into the personal life and personality of Tartini and some of the friends with whom he corresponded or otherwise talked about with affection, including Farinelli (letter 152, 437, and letter 157, 441–443) or his ‘dearest Signor Nardini’ (letter 176, 461). Besides discussing music passionately, Tartini often sends tobacco and chocolate with his letters or thanks friends for what they have sent, including women’s stockings (presumably for his wife) and rosolio (his wife’s favourite tipple). Such exchanges of food and drink are carried on with tact and a sense of light-hearted humour. In one letter, for example, after praising Anton Raaff’s original style of singing, he continues, on a different note: ‘I shall come to another thing in confidence. I am a connoisseur of good and healthy chocolate. However, not trusting my taste, I am sending Your Reverence, for Signor Antonio, a small sample, so that the three of you can try it: you, Signor Dottor Balbi and Signor Antonio’ (letter 78, 333). From the footnote we learn that ‘Signor Antonio’ is the castrato Antonio Maria Bernacchi (1685–1756), but information about the physician Paolo Battista Balbi is missing from the notes.

Throughout the edition, the critical apparatus is inconsistent in the amount and quality of information it provides. This is a minor problem, considering that the great value of this edition is to stimulate curiosity, rather than to provide definitive answers. And by this measure it is a wonderful resource for the study of eighteenth-century music and culture. The printed volumes are not easy to find, as they are not available on the e-market, including Amazon. However, the book is available as an open-access resource through the portal of the publisher (Edizioni Università di Trieste) and the PDF of each volume can be downloaded free of charge (via <https://eut.units.it>). Working with the digital edition has the advantage of allowing scholars to perform automated searches, without having to rely on the published indexes at the end of each volume, which do not list all of the names, objects and locations in which researchers may be interested. Furthermore, working with the digital edition opens up the opportunity of conducting research on material culture or linguistics (it is interesting, for example, to check for the occurrence of terms like ‘cioccolata’/‘chocolate’, ‘corda’/‘string’, ‘accordo’/‘chord’ or the use of ‘servitore’/‘servant’ in salutation formulas).

The book is also enjoyable to read in its entirety. Tartini’s letters are written in a literary style that shows that he was aware of their potential value as texts circulating among a broader readership. Rarely do they read like intimate confessions, and Tartini is careful not to reveal too much of himself, occasionally alerting his addressee that there are arguments that he is not comfortable discussing in writing and rather prefers to talk about in person (for example, in letter 118, 398–399). We need to read these documents without forgetting their semi-public value, which limits our access to the real and secret life of an artist who was careful to control his public image, as evidenced by his rage about an ugly portrait of himself that started circulating in 1761 (letter 164, 448–449, and plate 26, 531). It is perhaps owing to his cautious cultivation of a respectful and dignified public image that the famous episode of the Devil visiting Tartini in his sleep and inspiring him to write the ‘Devil’s Trill Sonata’ is never mentioned in his letters and was in fact only discussed in person with one of Tartini’s visitors, who transmitted it to us without the violinist’s consent.

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